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Publics and prejudice in radio research

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Invited essay

What does the success of shock radio in America tell us about the act of listening in public life?

While there might be any number of reasons to ask such a question, or to propose answers to it, a conventional way of answering such a question might be to conduct some variety of audience research. This would likely include identifying some sort of representative sample of willing participants to be questioned about their listening habits or predilections. Whatever the particular methodology used – questionnaire, diary, interview, focus group, etc. – the research would most likely involve asking respondents about particular shows that they had listened in to. However interesting the answers, and whatever the original critical intent of such research, I want to suggest that such an approach is actually very limited in what it can say in answer to a question about listening as a public activity. Simply put, this is because to research how and why people listen *in* to particular shows is always already to have conceived of the listening public as determined *by* the radio broadcast. To this extent at least, such research shares something in common with many forms of market and ratings research that are driven to understand how broadcasts work - or fail to work - to attract and keep their audiences: that is, the research itself might also be said, by extension, to be produced - or at least defined -by the radio broadcast. Textual or discursive approaches to answering the question - however sophisticated - are of necessity caught up in a similar bind. A programme exists for interpretation, for the analysis of its place in the interplay of discourses and power relations. It is the presence of shock radio in the world, to take just one example, that produces the concerns – academic, public and political – about its resonances and reverberations.

Although these various research models can provide hugely important insights into the practices and politics of radio programmes and their audiences, the reason I

suggest that they are of limited value in answering the specific question about the act of listening in public life posed above, is that they rest on a notion of the public that is circumscribed by the broadcasting corporations. And they often implicitly rest on a notion of listening that is somehow privatized, instrumentalized and commodified, and synonymous with consumption and passivity. In other words, these models rest on an idea of the public as market, and on the idea of listening as tuning in. Indeed, they tend to assume that people only become part of the category of 'listeners' when they act as consumers in the radio marketplace.

Now of course there will be exceptions to this caricatured account, but if there is any sense in it, then thinking about shock radio might in fact illuminate the question in another way. One of the concerns about shock radio is presumably - and rightly - about the way much of it produces and reproduces discourses of intolerance and prejudice. This works at an explicit level – the incendiary and offensive remarks, the peddling of stereotypes, the tribalization of political opinion, the privileging of shock value over civic values, and so on. It also works at an implicit level inasmuch as it functions within a radio industry that aims to provide programming that targets particular sectional interests and promotes station loyalty. By this token, mainstream American radio encourages listeners to tune in to shows that echo their already existing tastes and opinions. The fact that shock radio shows attract millions of listeners would seem to suggest that their listeners not only tune in to these kinds of prejudice, but buy into them too. Or, alternatively, that there is an already existing marketplace for such views to which the shock jocks simply bring their wares. The trouble with both these analyses is that they are caught up in a cybernetic system that circulates only around the originating text.

A different interpretation is available, however, if instead of (or rather, alongside) thinking of publics as markets and listeners as consumers, we think of publics as a *latent* civic collectivity, and of listeners as citizens in the public sphere. Put simply, this involves a move from a focus on listening *in* to particular texts to listening *out*. Listening in this sense is more easily identified as a critical practice. The audience is recognized in its role as *auditors* of public discourse.

So the very fact that shock radio is shocking should remind us that the audience is neither predetermined by the radio show nor are the ways in which shows resonate in public necessarily harmonious. The very controversies that surround shock radio, in other words, are evidence of the way in which the act of listening in public life is about the auditing of public discourse. The listening public is actively engaged in debates about what is being broadcast and, just as importantly, what is not being broadcast – which voices are *not* being heard. The listening public is not separate from the public in general. A listening public is not constituted only in the act of listening in.

I want to argue that it is necessary to understand listening not only as a mode of reception, but as a civic practice and a critical tool - and as a political action in its own right. Listening is not only about response, but also about responsibility. Shock radio as a text is defined in part precisely by the way it doesn't give subjects a fair hearing. A fair hearing ought to be part of the democratic arsenal, as important to a properly functioning public sphere as the freedom of expression. Listening out is just as difficult and courageous a political act as speaking up. The success of shock radio, in short, perhaps counter-intuitively tells us that the act of listening in public life is crucial to the safeguarding of democracy.